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Reporter with two masters

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Stansfield Turner, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was in town recently to tell us that news reporters should support their government by acting as undercover agents.

I am here today to tell you that this idea is loony. News reporters can best serve their government by acting as news reporters. Period.

If a reporter tries to serve the public by working both for the readers of whatever publication employs him and for the CIA, somebody will be short-changed. Either the readers won't get the full story or the CIA will find some of its cherished secrets in print. And the reporter, bless his patriotic heart, will damn well wind up with an ulcer.

The reason that someone will be short-changed is that it's impossible for a person in the conflicting businesses of reporting the news and of stealing and keeping state secrets to always draw the line between revealing and repressing in exactly the right place. The reason for the ulcer is that the strain of making those decisions eventually will take its toll. Those of us in the business of gathering and disseminating the news are human, too, you know.

All right, I heard that gasp of disbelief. And you can just stop that snickering, too.

I can give you a personal example of what would happen if Turner had his way and turned reporters into spies. No, I haven't worked for the CIA, but I did spend 17 years in the intelligence branch of the Navy Reserve, which meant dealing with secret material during my two weeks of active duty every year.

I was looked upon with suspicion by the active duty types at every one of those 17 duty stations. The presence of a newspaper reporter/editor was announced loudly and clearly at

every opportunity from the first day through the last.

This being so, I decided right from the start that — for both my peace of mind and theirs — I would belong entirely to the Navy for that two-week period. I would totally abandon my civilian role and give no thought whatever to the news value of the material presented.

That system always worked. Except once.

In January of 1972 I was ordered to two weeks active duty with Fleet Intelligence Center Pacific (known to the Navy as FICPAC) at Pearl Harbor. This was a couple of weeks after President Nixon ordered the famous Christmas bombing of North Vietnam.

The first couple of days at FICPAC were spent at routine tasks under the tutelage of a Marine gunnery sergeant who spent most of his time bitching about not being in the thick of the fighting in Vietnam. "Can't get a promotion sittin' in a chair in Hawaii," he explained.

On Wednesday, a large packet of photographs stamped "TOP SECRET" arrived and all hell broke loose in FICPAC. Mr. Nixon, it seems, was considering an invasion of North Vietnam and these were aerial reconnaissance shots of the potential landing site. FICPAC was to analyze the photos and make a recommendation to Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) by Friday morning.

The gunny I was working with was the best photo analyst in the shop, so he was selected to work on this project along with the commander who was head of the photo interpretation section. The gunny liked what I had done during my first two days with him, so it was decided that the reserve from Twin Cities could help with some of the less sophisticated parts of the study. Apparently they had forgotten my newspaper connection.

But I hadn't. What a story to be sitting on! How could a newsman keep quiet about an impending invasion of North Vietnam? Obviously, this newsman had to keep quiet since disclosure would endanger the lives of the American troops involved.

The story got even better. The area we were studying was absolutely bristling with anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile launchers. These were dug into solid rock on islands fronting the potential landing site and steep mountains behind the beach. The commander had to recommend to the admiral (CINCPACFLT) that the idea of landing troops there be abandoned.

By Friday afternoon, not only had the landing site been abandoned, but the whole plan to invade North Vietnam had been canceled. Now I had a legitimate news story that could be told without endangering any lives, but I hadn't the slightest opportunity to tell it. The information was still secret and if it appeared in the St. Paul newspapers and was picked up by the wire services everybody at FICPAC would know exactly who to blame.

All through the weekend I fretted and fumed. Was telling the story of how close we had come to invading North Vietnam worth risking a court martial?

On Tuesday I picked up a copy of *Newsweek* and turned through habit to the back page, where the late Stewart Alsop's column appeared.

Alsop's column was all about a proposed U.S. invasion of North Vietnam that was canceled after intelligence studies were conducted by the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet. All the details were correct; the only thing missing was the name of the intended invasion site. There was one hell of a reporter.

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